

Introduction

question a whole series of once confidently asserted propositions about the behavior of voters in the past.

People respond, in short, to the great drama of the public scene. But this drama, as it is set before them and as they perceive it, is not identical with questions involving material interests and the possession of power. Even those who exercise power are not immune to the content of the drama. In any case, they are forced to deal, as an element in their calculations, with the emotional life of the masses, which is not something that they can altogether create or manipulate, but something that they must cope with. The political contest itself is deeply affected by the way in which it is perceived and felt.

This does not mean that the material interests of politics can be psychologized away or reduced to episodes in intellectual history. It means only that historians and political scientists have always worked, implicitly or explicitly, with psychological assumptions; that these ought to be made as conscious as possible; and that they should be sophisticated enough to take ample account of the complexity of political action. I have no interest in denying the reality, or even the primacy, of the problems of money and power, but only in helping to define their reality by turning attention to the human context in which they arise and in which they have to be settled.

To accept all this is not to abandon whatever was of value in the old conception of political history; it suggests that this conception ought to be supplemented by another which amplifies our sense of political life and does justice to the variety of political activity. The intellectual currents stirred by such minds as Freud and Weber, Cassirer and Mannheim, have begun to move American historical writing in exploratory directions. The work of analyzing the significance of intellectual and rhetorical styles, of symbolic gestures, and of the specialized ethos of various subgroups within the population has already produced some remarkable studies. Henry Nash

*The Paranoid
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American Politics
and Other Essays*

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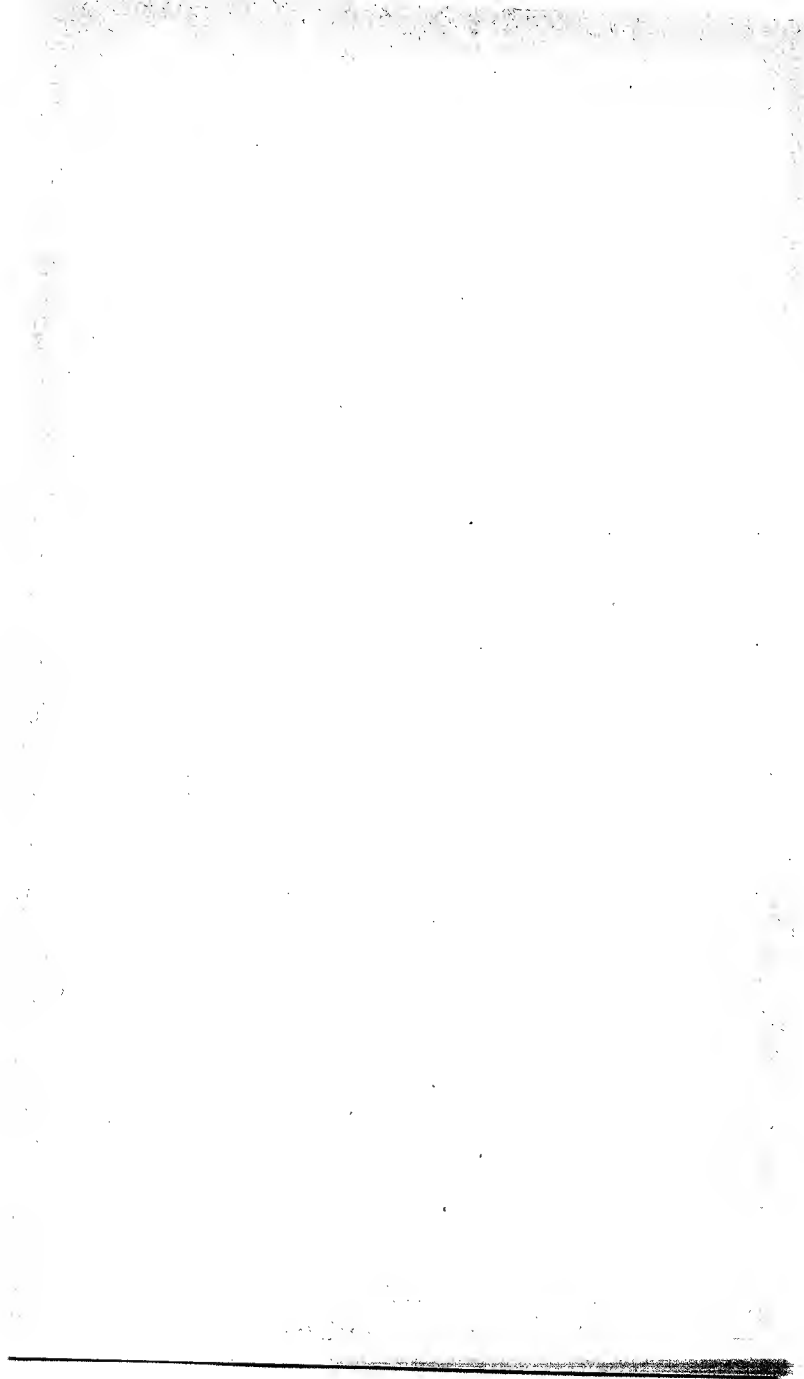
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TO THE MEMORY OF
HARRY J. CARMAN



Introduction

THE most difficult and delicate task that faces the author of a book of essays is that of writing an introduction that makes his various pieces seem considerably more unified, in theme and argument, than they were in fact when they were written. The best case for gathering essays in a book is simply that it makes them more accessible and more permanent. The best case that can be made for the unity of any such collection is a personal and informal one, and perhaps for that reason is rarely resorted to; it is that the several parts, as the product of a single mind, have a certain stamp upon them; they must be, at least in their style of thought and their concerns, unified by some underlying intellectual intent.

The pieces in this book were written over a span of fourteen years, and during that time I have not always been of the same mind about historical and political matters in general or about some of the particulars dealt with here. Some unresolved tensions undoubtedly remain. It is not, then, a single consistent argument but a set of related concerns and methods that unites these essays. They fall into two groups: one deals with conditions that have given rise to the extreme right of the 1950's and the 1960's, the other with the origins of certain characteristic problems of the earlier modern era when the American mind was beginning to respond to the facts of industrialism

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and world power. All deal with public responses to a critical situation or an enduring dilemma, whether it is the sudden threat posed by giant business to competition, the panic of the 1890's and the long-standing monetary disputes and sectional animosities it brought to a head, the moral shock of our nascent imperialism, the effects of resurgent fundamentalism on secular politics, the impact of the cold war on the public consciousness.

Since these studies have to do with the style of our political culture as a whole, and with certain special styles of thought and rhetoric that have prevailed within it, they tell more about the milieu of our politics than about its structure. They are more centrally concerned with the symbolic aspect of politics than with the formation of institutions and the distribution of power. They focus on the way large segments of the public respond to civic issues, make them their own, put them to work on national problems, and express their response to these problems in distinctive rhetorical styles. Because my concern is in this sense a bit one-sided, it is necessary to be clear—it is here that the intent of these essays is most likely to be misunderstood—that my reasons for emphasizing milieu rather than structure do not stem from the belief that, of the two, milieu is more important. My case is a more moderate one: it rests—quite aside from the pleasure I take in analyzing styles of thought—on two convictions: first, that our political and historical writing, until recently, has tended to emphasize structure at the cost of substantially neglecting milieu; and second, that an understanding of political styles and of the symbolic aspect of politics is a valuable way of locating ourselves and others in relation to public issues.

The older conception of politics was that it deals with the question: Who gets what, when, how? Politics was taken as an arena in which people define their interests as rationally as possible and behave in a way calculated to realize them as fully as possible. But Harold Lasswell, who made this mono-

syllabic question the title of a well-known book on the substance of politics, was one of the first in this country to be dissatisfied with the rationalistic assumptions which it implied and to turn to the study of the emotional and symbolic side of political life. It became important to add a new conception to the older one: Who perceives what public issues, in what way, and why? To the present generation of historical and political writers it has become increasingly clear that people not only seek their interests but also express and even in a measure define themselves in politics; that political life acts as a sounding board for identities, values, fears, and aspirations. In a study of the political milieu these things are brought to the surface.

No doubt it is, more than anything else, the events of our time, and among these some of the most ominous and appalling, that have launched students of society upon a restless search for new methods of understanding. But the work of other intellectual disciplines has also made the present generation of historians more conscious of important aspects of behavior which our predecessors left largely in the background. An increasing interest of philosophers, anthropologists, and literary critics in the symbolic and myth-making aspects of the human mind has found its way into historical writing, and with it has come a growing sensitivity to the possibilities of textual analysis. The application of depth psychology to politics, chancy though it is, has at least made us acutely aware that politics can be a projective arena for feelings and impulses that are only marginally related to the manifest issues. The findings of public-opinion polls have made us far less confident than we used to be that the public responds to the issues as they are debated, and more aware that it reacts to them chiefly when they become the object of striking symbolic acts or memorable statements, or are taken up by public figures who themselves have a symbolic appeal. Our enhanced feeling for the non-rational side of politics has thrown into